



Press Information

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‘Whole system thinking’ urgently needed to address challenge of climate change

Single-minded focus on zero carbon buildings could lead to perverse outcomes, warns David Strong

The danger of the ‘zero carbon agenda’ that has gripped the UK construction industry is that it ignores social and economic sustainability and could result in highly perverse outcomes, leading architects, planners and property developers were warned today.

Speaking on the first day of the Ecobuild conference in London, Dr David Strong, chief executive of Inbuilt Consulting, called for an urgent reality check and a change to “whole system thinking”.

“I am a strong supporter of zero and low carbon buildings. The drive towards zero carbon is very important – it has had a powerful effect in galvanising the UK housebuilding and property development community and in stimulating innovation.

“But there is much more to delivering exemplary built environments than zero carbon,” says David Strong, who recently won the 2007 Sustainability Leadership Award and is one of the founders of the UK Green Building Council.

Commenting on recent prototype dwellings that meet the highest levels (Levels 5 and 6) of the Code for Sustainable Homes, David Strong warned that:

“The single-minded scramble to design and build Level 6 homes gives out the message that this is the highest ambition and most worthy outcome we should aim for.





“However, if we end up with ‘zero carbon’, Code Level 6 homes that are uneconomic to maintain, are built on flood plains, overheat in summer, have poor acoustic performance, poor indoor air quality or other unintended consequences, then we have created a generation of homes that are unfit for people. We can’t call this sustainability. The so-called ‘best’ are in real danger of becoming the enemy of the good.”

Addressing the challenge of climate change requires a holistic approach to deliver genuine sustainability, explained David Strong.

“We need whole system thinking. This means collaborative, multi-disciplinary, integrated team working like we’ve rarely seen before.

“It also means working to find natural solutions to reduce our dependence on energy-intensive systems. There are so many opportunities offered by nature to ventilate, heat, cool and illuminate our buildings, and cost savings to be made by designing out unnecessary technical complexity.”

David Strong also questioned the reality of “zero carbon” as a useful label for buildings, and warned that it could offer consumers a false promise:

“The actual definition of ‘zero carbon’ differs significantly between various Government departments and agencies, and some of the definitions are based on completely unscientific formulas. And anyway, a home is only ‘zero carbon’ in the sense that it complies with a theoretical carbon requirement. It’s how we use that home that really matters.

“A home can only be genuinely zero carbon if the occupants’ lifestyles are prescribed and energy is rationed in order to balance onsite energy generation – which is entirely politically unacceptable,” he said.

David Strong reminded delegates of the need to avoid being distracted from the vital challenges of reducing carbon emissions from the existing building stock, and of securing investment and planning permission for large scale renewable energy systems.





“In terms of pounds sterling invested per tonne of carbon saved, both of these objectives will provide a much greater and faster return than making all new homes ‘zero carbon’,” he explained.

He also sent a reminder to the Housing Minister, Caroline Flint MP, that an urgent inter-departmental Government review and strategic plan for improving the energy performance of the UK’s existing building stock was promised in November 2003. “It has never materialised”, he said.

Inbuilt Consulting is a major supporter of Ecobuild which takes place at Earls Court on 26 – 28 February. Inbuilt also has an exhibition stand at E830.

Ends

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Please contact us for copies of David Strong’s presentation at Ecobuild, interviews, high resolution photography or other media information.

About Inbuilt

Inbuilt Consulting is the UK’s first major consultancy specialising exclusively in sustainable buildings, communities and construction. Launched in December 2007, Inbuilt is a young and innovative company providing technical and consulting excellence in the research, design and delivery of sustainable built environments. It aims to ensure that sustainability becomes ‘inbuilt’, by providing integrated solutions. Drawing inspiration from nature and natural systems, Inbuilt’s objective is to design out technical complexity and cost, by continuously rethinking, challenging and improving accepted practices. Working in partnership with its clients, Inbuilt delivers spaces, places and buildings which are genuinely sustainable - healthy, safe, productive and inspiring - fit both for people and the environment. It is part of the RES Group, one of the world’s leading renewable energy companies.

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